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Background for Glenn  
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photo: Pat STOKER\* (S), Gardnar MULLOY; map: Spring

Garden neighborhood

SOURCE: ANA VECIANA-SUAREZ Herald Staff Writer

DATELINE:

MEMO:

THE NEIGHBORHOOD  
NOBODY KNOWS

SPRING GARDEN IS AN OASIS IN AN URBAN JUNGLE.

One discovers this neighborhood of gabled homes and mossy oaks by accident -- taking a wrong turn off Northwest Seventh Avenue, answering a fire call or visiting a friend. Jealous, careful residents want to keep it that way, a mystery oasis embraced by the river, boxed in by expressways and veiled from view by a regal spread of banyan trees.

Spring Garden. Its very name conjures up a verdant setting with winding roads and rambling homes, kiddies frolicking in yards, songbirds chirping in the trees. Indeed, all this is true.

What is confusing is the neighborhood's location. Spring Garden is barely three blocks from the Metro Justice Building, a stone's throw from an inner city slum and a comfortable walk from the medical complex. Nobody expects it to be there, not when commercial development has swallowed everything to the west and urban blight taken over to the east and north.

Nobody expects shady sea grapes and royal palms so close to downtown, or old Miami homes with arched windows and wraparound porches, Dutch colonials, Mediterranean Revivals, post-World War II stuccos and wood bungalows. Not smack in the middle of city bustle.

"I live in urban suburbia," says resident James Jacque, an anesthesiologist who can walk to work at the Veterans' Administration Hospital. "I have constant battles with the raccoons. I see opossums frequently. I hadn't seen a red-headed woodpecker in years until I moved here."

Spring Garden is a tiny pocket of a neighborhood, shaped like a triangle and extending over one-third of a square mile. It presses against the Miami River, between Northwest 12th and Seventh avenues, and retreats along the westward curve of the Seybold Canal. Its northern boundary is Northwest 11th Street.

Few people outside the area know of it.

"The taxi drivers, unless they're old-timers, don't know how to get here. They don't know it exists," says 20-year resident Zella Parla-Navarette.

"Nor do the plumbers or the electricians," sighs her sister Alicia.

"Not even Sears."

Residents have grown used to drawing maps for friends and answering



history as far back as the middle of the last century. Tennis great Gardnar Mulloy learned to play tennis on his father's Spring Garden court during the '20s and '30s. He now lives next door and recounts a Huck Finn childhood, swimming to the barges across the river and fishing along the water moccasin-

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infested marshes.

"There were bootleggers two houses down from us, and they had speedboats they souped up. They were always heading over to Blmini to bring in the stuff," Mulloy recalls. "It was a great place to be a boy."

One can't fish on the banks of the dirty river anymore or swim downstream with the help of a current. But unlike other old neighborhoods, Spring Garden's flavor and foliage, its quaint architecture, have remained intact in the face of mounting commercial and rezoning interests. Its fierce and loyal residents, who want to keep the neighborhood's single-family residential status, can take full credit for that stability.

When a neighboring area to the north, Highland Park, was sliced in two by State Road 836, the East-West Expressway, during the 1980s, Spring Garden remained untouched. When real estate speculators have tried to change the zoning to multifamily, neighbors have come out in force to fight back the challenges, although their constant appearances before city commissioners make some feel they are tilting at the windmills of City Hall.

"They have," says Joe McManus, assistant director of the city Planning Department, "a quite active, quite active civic association."

Residents still smart over the zoning battle they lost in the 1970s, when river-front property was converted into apartment complexes. This area, though technically within the neighborhood boundaries, is regarded by many as an area apart.

Much of the stability is due to the very low turnover among residents, who, once they move in, stay forever. "The people here only leave in boxes," jokes Ruth Greenfield. "Spring Garden has maintained its character because nobody wants to move."

The Greenfields live in a sprawling two-story home built in 1911. A vine crawls slyly along a walkway and tropical foliage garlands the gables and balconies, giving the house an Old South feeling. Her grandfather, a Key West department store owner, bought it in 1922 from a postman. Ruth and husband Arnold moved there in 1959 and reared four children in the home. She is considered the dowager queen of the neighborhood, the woman who knows most of the neighbors, much of the history and a lot of the area trivia.

"I love my neighborhood. It's not snobbish, it's not pretentious, it's very homey," says Greenfield, who has no plans to move.

In spite of encroaching development and a problem with petty crime, Spring Garden has remained a predominantly white, Anglo community. According to the 1980 Census, 89 percent of its 429 residents were white and 5 percent were black. Of the white residents, 19 percent were Hispanic. (The remaining residents did not list a classification). Residents also tend to be older. Only 13 percent of Spring Garden's residents were younger than 18, compared to 23.4 percent citywide. Because of the neighborhood's proximity to the Justice Building and hospitals along Northwest 12th Avenue, there is also a large medical community -- nurses, doctors in residency, technicians -- and legal professionals.

In the eight years since the census, neighbors say the demographics have changed subtly. Spring Garden is getting younger.



the past five years, several couples with young children.  
For many residents, this is a welcome sight. Bill Perry, former president of the NAACP and acting principal of COPE- North, wants to hear the shrieks and screams of kids at play.

"We might have about three kids on my block, and I miss that in a

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neighborhood," Perry says. "I miss listening to their voices."

As long-time residents die or grow old, more and more homes will become available to new families. And the same qualities that kept the old will attract the new, says Courson, a resident and president of Dynamic Realty.

Courson discovered the neighborhood when he and a group of city firefighters answered a call on a houseboat. He bought his home, complete with arch-beamed ceiling, a real fireplace and hardwood floors, for \$20,000 in 1970. Prices have risen steadily, but a Spring Garden home is still affordable. In recent months, Courson's real estate company sold a three-bedroom, two-bath for just under \$80,000. A two-bedroom, two-bath went for \$56,000.

Prospective home buyers are attracted by the neighborhood's charm and location. When Greenfield worked at Miami-Dade Community College's downtown campus, it took her eight minutes to ride her bike to work. And James Jacque laughingly complains that he can't call in late for work with car trouble. "They know I can just walk on over," he says.

Those who rent, as Jacque does, often become homeowners themselves if their medical residences develop into jobs in Miami. They love the neighborliness, treasure the feeling of privacy.

"I once lived in a 200-unit condo, and there were people on my floor I didn't talk to," Jacque says. "Here, I know practically everybody on my block. I find that very unusual in a city."

Neighborliness extends to old-fashioned hospitality. Every Christmas, residents Pat and Tommy Stoker host an open house. In the summer, residents get together for the annual picnic in an empty, shady lot owned by the Greenfields.

"When we moved in here, the neighbors adopted us," says Alicia Parla, who has lived in Spring Garden for 20 years. "If there's a death in the family, an illness, any type of problem, the neighbors come over to help. They bring over meals. They check on your house. They care."

Spring Garden, however, is not without its problems -- mainly burglaries and petty crimes. Perry's car has been broken into three times, his home twice. The crimes are not life-threatening, residents are quick to add, but they are annoying. Neighbors have put up large chain-link fences, and most own dogs. Crime Watch is also active. But residents don't think their neighborhood is any less safe than the suburbs to the southwest or the northeast.

Miami police spokesman George Law says this may be true. Law patrolled the area for about six months earlier this year. "The most major thing was that somebody stole a car," he said. "We do get a lot of calls of suspicious persons in the area. The neighbors there are very active, and it's so tiny everybody knows each other."

Lack of nearby schools and shopping is sometimes cited as a disadvantage in this all-residential neighborhood. For groceries, residents must drive to a Winn-Dixie in Little Havana or a Publix on Biscayne Boulevard, and many send their children to parochial school instead of the public inner

city ones. These inconveniences, some say, are a small price to pay. Spring Garden shouldn't, can't be changed.

"This is a very fragile and vulnerable place," explains Pat Stoker, past president of the Spring Garden Civic Association. "Anything could swing it the wrong way. My husband I know we're here to stay. This is our home for the rest of our lives."

ADDED TERMS:  
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July 24, 1994

Background

Ana Veciana-Suarez, Columnist  
Miami Herald Living Section

VIA FAX 376-3202

Dear Ms. Suarez,

I have read your columns faithfully for close to six years, your first having come to my attention when you wrote a column about our neighborhood, Spring Gardens, entitled "The Neighborhood Nobody Knows" (dated Friday, October 14, 1988 Living Today section). We have lived on the Miami River for many years and, like most residents of Spring Gardens, choose to reside here because we love the neighborhood for its rich, historic qualities and fascinating marine landscape, the convenience of being close to downtown and centrally located, and the fact that we are not part of the urban sprawl encroaching on the fragile Everglades environment.

Obviously, others agree that Spring Gardens has certain unique aesthetic qualities, for our neighborhood has recently been the site for filming of the feature length films such as "The Specialist". As developers rush to tear down and destroy more and more of the rich texture which defines Old Miami, we have always felt comforted by the fact that we had one of the few remaining neighborhoods close to downtown where one could raise a child, take a quiet evening stroll and converse with a culturally diverse group of neighbors, and due to strong neighborhood involvement where we look out for one another, enjoy a fairly high degree of personal safety without having to erect physical barricades and guardhouses.

We are now faced with the probable destruction of our Spring Gardens neighborhood. A monstrous East-West transportation corridor expansion project known as the Miami Intermodal Center East West Corridor Study has narrowed its selection of eight possible pathways to two, with engineers privately disclosing that they strongly favor the placement of an eight story overpass that would cross the Miami River and plow through Spring Gardens, continuing over the Seybold Canal before heading up N.W. 6th Street to the Port of Miami. At an initial meeting this spring called by the engineers for the purpose of informing us of the project, concerned Spring Gardens residents were assured that because of the historic nature of this neighborhood, the project would not likely pass through our area. We have learned, off the record, that in fact the engineers all along favored our site because it disrupts



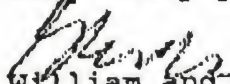
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the least amount of "business". Their disingenuous counsel caused most of us to be put at ease. We could not see how reasonable people would choose to destroy an historic neighborhood, when the already existing east-west 836 or 112 highways allowed expansion alongside. Either of those choices would attract ridership due to the heavy concentration of population there, unlike the route through our neighborhood. Once they destroy our neighborhood (my understanding is that they would only compensate those on whose property the corridor actually passes), the rest of us will be left with noise, pollution, shadows and ruined property values, and the fragile community of Spring Gardens as we know it would be gone.

As I read your column this morning I thought immediately of how you have been concerned with family, and the small, nonmonetary qualities of life which make everyday living bearable. I remembered your column about our neighborhood, and thought you might be interested in a story about how our bureaucrats and technicians seem without fail to seek out those good, little places that still exist and set about to destroy them in the name of progress. Is it any wonder that people who value a certain old-fashioned quiet existence would be driven from this city? Generations of families who have grown up in this neighborhood, and whose children have bought homes here, continuing the Spring Gardens tradition, will be displaced and separated. Other Old Miamians will lose one of the few remaining delights of the old City. For example, the Miami River historian, Don Gaby, has already departed the River (and City) for that reason, seeking out Ormond Beach because of its respect of the old properties and quality of life. Witness how Ft. Lauderdale has sought to enhance the charming atmosphere of its River, and how Miami seeks to destroy our River; you can only wonder at our City's lack of foresight.

We would welcome your interest and your passing along this letter to anyone else at The Herald who might have an interest in historic preservation. Gail Meadows and Beth Dunlop come to mind. The Press has tremendous power which can be harnessed for good when the proper causes and columnists come together. We do not oppose progress; but we oppose the greed and carelessness which destroys the spirit of the people of this City. Spirit resides in the neighborhoods, especially the older ones where it has had time to grow and mature. For example, Overtown with its rich black history, was split by I-95 in the name of "progress". Without spirit and neighbors' solidarity, how do we stop the sterile trends of greedy developers and their willing accomplices in the City? Can't we trace many of our problems as a society back to our flight from the cities? Destroying this downtown neighborhood that "works" is the first step to transforming Spring Gardens into yet another Miami slum.

Very truly yours,

  
 William and Glenda Ekasala